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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001339

SIPDIS

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 09/10/2019

TAGS: [OSCE](#) [PGOV](#) [PINR](#) [PHUM](#) [TU](#)

SUBJECT: TURKEY: "DEMOCRATIC INITIATIVE" STILL INCOMPLETE

REF: A. ANKARA 1295

[1](#)B. ANKARA 1155

[1](#)C. ANKARA 1158

Classified By: POL Counselor Daniel O'Grady, for reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Details of the Government's Kurdish Initiative remain elusive. Interior Minister Atalay's August 31 press conference on the "Democratization Initiative," which is being developed as a solution to the long-simmering tensions between the Turkish state and its Kurdish population, has so far largely reinvigorated speculation. Atalay's presentation was short on details, but indicated that the government is still developing a multifaceted approach to solving the Kurdish issue by expanding the democratic rights and freedoms of all Turkish citizens. Embassy contacts within AKP reiterate this approach, noting that despite press reports purporting to be leaks of "definite steps" to be included in the process, nothing has yet been finalized but much already is underway. However, outside AKP, the lack of clarity has dampened much of the earlier optimism. In an all-too-typical manner, the Turkish Government appears to be groping for its next steps -- in tune, as one contact told us, with a Turkish saying that "if you want to reach Damascus, you can ask along the way." END SUMMARY.

[1](#)2. (SBU) Since it was announced, the Turkish press and political opposition has been speculating freely about what exactly would be included in the government's "Kurdish Initiative," now more properly termed a "Democratization Initiative." Several newspapers have listed a number of specific policies that their sources claimed would definitely be included in the package. Opposition leaders are loudly speculating at the damage that the as-yet unannounced policies would do to Turkish unity by driving cultural wedges between the country's constituent ethnicities. Abdullah Ocalan, the imprisoned leader of the PKK terrorist organization, will issue a roadmap of his own, to either complement or compete with the government's project. Amid this turbid and often self-contradictory environment, Interior Minister Besir Atalay, the government's pointman for the initiative, presented the results of his month of discussions with politicians, NGOs, business associations, and academics on August 31.

[1](#)3. (SBU) Atalay focused on allaying the fears of the opposition and on empowering Turkey's citizens both legally and psychologically, without putting forward concrete details of the planned initiative. He noted that his meetings showed

that Turkey's thinkers had reached a consensus that the alienation of the Kurds must end, that terrorism must stop, and that all of society's actors should come together to achieve these goals. He derived from this a set of goals for the Initiative: to end the threat of terrorism, to increase unity among citizens, and to create prosperity and equality. He emphasized that the project would benefit all of Turkey's citizens. Atalay addressed concerns that discussing ethnic differences would polarize the citizenry, a common criticism of the Republican People's Party (CHP) and Nationalist Action Party (MHP), stating that the prevention of discussion causes rifts in society, rather than resolving them.

14. (SBU) He also countered allegations that foreign think-tanks and governments were directing the program by stressing that the Turkish government and think-tanks have been conducting similar studies and programs for years, independently of outside forces, and that to insist that nothing happens in Turkey without outside influence showed a lack of confidence in Turkey and its people. He rounded out his message by announcing that his consultations with civil society would continue, to include the Higher Education Board (YOK) and universities. The government would begin to unveil concrete proposals in October once the research phase of the project had been completed.

15. (C) Atalay's points were echoed in our meetings with AKP Vice Chairman Abdulkadir Aksu and AKP Diyarbakir MP Abdurrahman Kurt, both Turkish Kurds. Baldly declaring the information leaked to the press to be "lies," Aksu said that a wide range of options were still being discussed and none

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had yet been put into the prospective package. He noted that many of the points trumpeted by the press -- such as readoption of old Kurdish place names, Kurdish culture and literature faculties at universities, and the use of Kurdish in prisons and police stations -- were already taking place. Kurt insisted that Atalay was still making the rounds asking all sectors of society how they would solve the Kurdish problem, and the final package would be an amalgam of those ideas put into a coherent form. Kurt pointed out that the government had to carefully assess Turkey's "digestion capacity" and plan its reform program accordingly. With a gradual opening to discussion -- not just about Kurds, but other minorities, such as Alevis, Armenians, and Jews -- over the past decade, Turkish society can digest much more debate now than before, but still has its limits. Given the constructive and open debate of today, he said, Turkey should be able to handle a deeper debate in the future, enabling longer-term reforms.

16. (C) Aksu reinforced that the project is to be a democratic one, not just a Kurdish one. "The Kurdish problem is not the only problem in Turkey," he asserted, and went on to argue that the democratization project's terms would be worded generally so as to address the expansion of the great majority of Turkey's citizens, regardless of their background. Kurt argued that, though the Kurdish issue cannot be denied, it is not a monolithic entity. He pointed out that just as there is no one entity that can speak for the Turks, the Kurds are discovering that no one can speak for all Kurds. Any successful solution, therefore, would have to address the needs of all Turkish citizens, and also must take into account the variety within Kurdish society.

17. (C) Outside the AKP, a far more skeptical view prevails. A sampling of Turkish military officers have told us that they are pessimistic. They agree that it would take more than military means to end the PKK problem, and they support the GOT's efforts on other fronts. However, they also believe that the only reason the AKP has embarked on this initiative is to garner votes from the southeast in the 2011 election. Additionally, these military officers see no logical incentive for the PKK to disarm. They view the PKK as in essence a large criminal organization which is making a

great deal of money, which it would be loath to give up.

18. (C) In a September 8 meeting with us, Hurriyet Bureau Chief Enis Berberoglu echoed this pessimistic assessment. He doubted the Government would unveil much more than what is already discussed (private Kurdish television, Kurdish village names, etc.) because it senses that the Turkish public does not favor additional significant steps on such things as local or regional autonomy, let alone a general amnesty for PKK fighters. Typically, Berberoglu noted, the Government has started on a path without really considering how to reach its ultimate goal, in keeping with the Turkish saying that "if you want to reach Damascus, you can ask along the way."

19. (C) COMMENT: The AKP government is feeling its way slowly but deliberately to arrive at a policy that can be brought before Parliament and formally debated. Following its presentation to Parliament in October, debate should be more focused and concrete. However, the informal debate that has been generated by the press is valuable. Firstly, it serves as a test for measuring the public's comfort level for specific policies, allowing the government to determine which steps will be relatively easy (such as restoring old Kurdish names to towns) and which will be difficult (empowerment of municipalities over a greater scope of services-provision and taxation power). Minister Atalay, a former pollster, is familiar with the vagaries of public opinion and is no doubt crafting the initiative in graduated steps in response to public debate and concerns. Secondly, the very act of debate lays the ground for further debate, removing the taboos that Atalay rightly claims perpetuate social divisions. As a result, the sector of society that is ready to examine what it means to be a Turk is growing and is now larger than the sector that refuses to look critically at such an existential issue. Still, the lack of clarity and slow movement are dissipating much of the earlier optimism about a solution being reached in 2009.

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